THE PUBLIC
West Bromwich, UK
Will Alsop Architects

This new art centre accommodates a variety of artistic, community and educational activities and material, from exhibitions to events and commercial endeavours. Designed to be functional and flexible, the building's singular definition, but a challenging theme is to draw a direct relationship to the viewer. Be it staff, visitor or passerby.

As with any Alsop work, the volume as a whole catches the eye from the get-go but at the ground floor it becomes more clearly the building's public nature, extending the adjacent open space with thorough routes that encourage interaction and engagement with the building's occupants and contents. A cafe bar open to all helps out. The Public Gallery forms the beating heart of The Public, showing exciting and conceptual art from local and international artists.

With an emphasis on interaction, IT and digital arts, culture is the construction of a site that art can play an important role in transforming the cultural and economic experience of people. There is even help for inciting creative businesses, aimed at narrating the real-life situations of local talent. This cultural identity is embodied most directly in the Lily Pads at the top of the building.

The Public will house a plethora of happenings, from concerts to seminars, workshops to film and performances, each taking place in diverse spaces within the huge box Alsop has made. And that was his purpose—to be a hub of cultural activity, the form means the stuff it is made of, activities it holds. Courses, materials, views, angles and spaces are combined deliberately together and code-named Pod, Rock, Rock and the like. At places, sub-forms such as the tunnel, 21m x 21m x 3in box as production for a playhouse, as if its creative energy could no longer be contained. Jellybean openings bring light into the building and obscure its wherewithal personality from afar.

The Public is a step up, with liberal gaps, buying times, augured and correct articulation and, this being in Alsop creations, plenty of colour.

We all thoroughly Will Alsop, and put the latter addition to an office first is pronounced internationally. At times it seems as other trends on ceramics, Alsop works a new skill and never disappoints the expectation for surprise. As might be asked where his "language" ultimately leads, though one suspects he would run at the heart in the first instance. Indeed, for those who are one of the more original minds now working in architecture—very often with the loads of work or programming, clients that prevent the consistency of coherence. Is the architecture playing within, evolving with a new version of Postmodernism or progressing that architecture take itself a bit less seriously?

Or is he simply an individualistic artist using the canvas of constructed buildings to explore methods of interaction and the recontextualisation of forms? In that case the sites and needs of his buildings have found themselves enjoying the rather bombastic attention that seems to greet his work. Yet those are not small structures, or modestly small; Alsop is on the forefront of cultural architecture, notated for some of the world's most high-profile commissions. The Public isn't destined to be a new, true original.